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ABSTRACT

Intended to enable Catholic educators to evaluate and compare the writing progress of their students to that of the nation as a whole, this report presents writing achievement data of Catholic school students in grades 4, 8, and 11, assessed in 1983-84 by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). A summary of the findings of the NAEP Reading Report, a complementary study, is presented and discussed in terms of a larger school-based context. The first of three sections reporting NAEP writing results presents comparisons based on the following factors in student' background: demographic characteristics, parental education, and residential location. The second section provides overall score comparisons, while the third section analyzes the writing proficiency scores in terms of grade level, school grouping, and racial/ethnic group. The major findings derived from these comparisons indicate that (1) writing scores in both types of schools are not very high, on average; (2) Catholic school students write better than the national average at all three grade levels; (3) students gain more writing skills in late elementary and middle school than they seem to during secondary school; (4) on average, girls are considerably better writers than boys in both types of schools and across all grade levels; and (5) minority students (Black and Hispanic) score considerably below White students in writing in both type of schools. (JD)

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NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS WRITING PROFICIENCY: 1983-84

CATHOLIC SCHOOL RESULTS AND NATIONAL AVERAGES

Final Report

1987

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Background

This report should be considered the second of a series. The first report, entitled 1983-84 National Assessment of Educational Progress Reading Proficiency: Catholic School Results and National Averages, was published by the National Catholic Education Association in 1985. The present report is meant to build upon the Reading Report, and makes the assumption that readers are familiar with it. The reasons for coordinating the two reports are several. First, much of the background information about recent research which compares the academic performance of Catholic and public school students is as relevant to this report as to the former. It would, therefore, be redundant to repeat it here. Second, the data for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 1983-84 writing assessment were gathered simultaneously from the same sample as that used for the reading assessment, and as such the two assessments could be considered as parts of a more complete assessment of language skills of America's elementary, middle, and secondary school students. Therefore, information about the demographic characteristics and academic behaviors of the students in the two groups of schools, as well as characteristics of the schools themselves, are identical for the two comparison groups. Third, the results of the NAEP writing assessment are most interesting and meaningful when compared with those from the reading assessment, again since both reading and writing are components of language skills. Comparing reading and writing results of Catholic schools with the national average of schools would require that readers become familiar with the Reading Report in any case. For all of these reasons, the two reports should be viewed as complementary studies.

What is NAEP?

The National Assessment of Educational Progress was established by the federal government, through the then Office of Education, in the late 1960s. It is still sponsored and funded by the U.S. Department of Education through the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), and administered by Educational Testing Service. Periodic assessments, begun in 1970 and conducted in a wide range of curricular areas (reading, writing, math, science, social studies, computer literacy and, recently, adult literacy), are meant to "take the academic pulse" of the nation's in-school population in these skill areas. Large samples of schools and students within them are selected randomly across the nation to accomplish this task. The primary purpose of the assessments is to inform educators, policy makers, and the general public about the current status and change over time in the competency levels of American students. Truly, NAEP is mandated to chart "educational progress."

Of course, a change in proficiency levels over time can be ascribed to schooling only if the population being assessed remains constant. Although national leaders have decried the decline in SAT scores in the 1970s, we now know that a large proportion of that decline is attributable to a greatly expanded "clientele" for these tests.[1] This expanded clientele reflected what many might interpret as a positive move in American education -- access to higher education for a new group of students. However, the same phenomenon has occurred (albeit less dramatically) in the elementary and secondary school populations. That is, we know that there have been considerable changes in the demographic characteristics of the nation's school population over the last two decades, and these changes are relected in NAEP results. Very briefly, the changes are in the direction of a higher minority enrollment, slightly lower socioeconomic status, and somewhat lower achievement levels[2]. Focusing almost

exclusively on levels of proficiency in specific curricular areas, NAEP assessments might be seen as less useful than large-scale multipurpose longitudinal surveys such as High School and Beyond, Project Talent, or the National Longitudinal Study in answering "why" questions about educational progress. However, as an assessment, NAEP is meant to answer "what" questions about educational proficiency levels at a particular point in time, as well as changes over a period of time. That is, proficiency levels may be very accurately estimated for subgroups of American students -- racial/ethnic subgroups, gender groups, grouped by parental educational levels, by regions, and (for the first time) by school types such as Catholic schools. Changes over time are not evaluated on the same students (i.e. NAEP is not a longitudinal study), but the study measures nationally representative cohorts of students of the same age (e.g. 13) at different years (i.e. cross-sectional).

Besides periodically assessing student proficiency levels in a wide variety of academic areas, the major advantage of NAEP over other survey-based studies is that these subject areas are assessed at three age/grade levels: 9 years old (4th grade); 13 years old (8th grade); and 17 years old (11th grade). Although strictly causal analyses are not possible with NAEP data, determination of achievement levels for these three crucial educational ages and grade levels are available. In the school year 1983-84, the National Assessment surveyed reading and writing, which were mentioned earlier. I wish to discuss these results in the context of "good schooling" which I will lay out shortly -- high achievement and low achievement differences between different subgroups of students.

Summary of NAEP Reading Results

In order to put the results of the NAEP writing assessment in the context of language skills described earlier, a short summary of the findings of the

Reading Report is in order. For full details, readers should consult the report cited above. In the 1983-84 school year, it was found that Catholic school students, when compared to the national average, showed the following characteristics:

- They demonstrated significantly higher reading proficiency than the national average at all three grade levels assessed by NAEP: 4th, 8th, and 11th grades;

- When comparing the relative reading proficiency of White and Black students in the two types of schools, the advantage of White over Black students in Catholic schools was considerably less than for the national average at all three grade levels;

- Similarly smaller White students' reading proficiency advantages over Hispanic students was also found in Catholic compared to national average schools at 4th, 8th, and 11th grades;

- Despite these smaller differences between White students and either their Black or Hispanic counterparts in Catholic schools, both racial/ethnic groups in Catholic schools demonstrated higher reading achievement than their national average counterparts;

- By 11th grade, the average student in either Catholic or national average schools read at or near an adept level, and the average 8th grader in both types of schools read above an intermediate level.

It was also found that students in Catholic schools reported doing more homework, watching less television, and taking more academic courses. We know that all of these behaviors are related to higher achievement. Although in that study (as in this one), no causal inferences can be drawn due to the nature of the NAEP data, it is likely that these academically related behaviors, at least some of which can be attributed to school policies, in some sense account for the stronger academic performance of students in Catholic schools. Since most of the earlier research findings which documented the superior performance of Catholic to public high school students were drawn from analyses of high school students, it was gratifying to find that these findings were generalizable to elementary and middle schools, as well. Since Catholic high schools tend to be somewhat more selective than lower schools, it was reassuring to find that the performance of students at all levels of Catholic schooling compared favorably to the national average.

These conclusions were qualified, however, since we were unable to make causal statements about the findings. There were two reasons for this qualification. First, Catholic school students' performance was compared to the national average of students, some 10 to 15 percent of whom attend Catholic schools. Therefore, the comparison groups were not discrete (or independent). Second, and considerably more important, the results were not adjusted for the fact that we know that more socially advantaged students attend Catholic schools than the national average. Although these two limitations to comparisons are likely to operate in different directions, we could not assess the relative effects they introduced into results. Therefore, it was noted that we could not ascribe the superior reading performance of these students uniquely to the fact that they attend Catholic schools. It is important to note that both of these caveats apply to all statements contained in the present report, as well.

What is a Good School?

Before presenting the results from the NAEP writing results, however, I would like to place these Catholic school/national average comparisons in a larger school-based context. Specifically, let us explore an interpretation of the reading proficiency comparisons presented above, which found that (a) Catholic school students of all racial/ethnic groups outscored their national average counterparts; and (b) the proficiency levels of minority and White students within Catholic schools were relatively less diverse than those in the nation's average schools. What are some possible implications of these two simultaneous findings about Catholic schools? How might these findings relate to school quality?

School quality can be defined in many ways. Almost everyone concerned with education is interested in identifying the characteristics of a high-quality school, a good school, an effective school. The most familiar definition of school quality -- for researchers, for school administrators, and for the general public -- would be in terms of high achievement. That is, the achievement level on some standardized test is averaged across all the students in a school who have taken that particular test. "Good Schools" are, thus, those with high average achievement, according to that very common definition. By this standard, we know that Scarsdale High School in New York, New Trier High School in Illinois, Phillips Andover Academy in Massachusetts, Beverly Hills High School in California, or Regis High School in New York City would qualify as "good schools".

However, we know something else about this type of "good" school. Most schools defined solely by this standard are also quite selective. Public high schools like Scarsdale and New Trier are not directly selective. That is, they may not turn away students who do not meet their academic standards. For

"selective" public schools, the process of selection is exercized indirectly, through the price of real estate in the districts which are served by these schools. Since family income and school achievement are, unfortunately, related, high-priced houses often shelter high-scoring students. Although neither Regis nor Andover has residential (i.e. real estate) requirements, we know that these schools exercize their selection process more directly -- through restrictive admissions policies. In all the cases named here, selective schools might be defined as "good schools" because they enroll "good students." But may we honestly ascribe such "goodness" to the school, simply because that school is fortunate enough to be able, either directly or indirectly, to select its students? Probably not.

Perhaps what we really want to know is what "good schooling" is. However, we each may have our own definition of "good" when it comes to looking at schools. Clearly, most people would include in a definition of "good schooling" something more than purely academic achievements, although it seems unlikely that anyone would be willing to eliminate that dimension of schooling from a definition of quality. Perhaps one would also require some infusion of a system of values in "good schools"[3]. Most Catholic educators would probably include both of these criteria in their definitions.

I would like to present my own definition of a "good" school, one that may or may not appeal to others. That school is one which is effective in producing high academic achievement for all the students who attend. Of course, by that standard, the New Triers, Regises, and Andovers would still qualify. However, these schools are perhaps less interesting to this definition of school quality than are schools which enroll a wider diversity of students. The more diverse student bodies of this second group of schools mean that they are less selective

than the ones mentioned above. Employing the language of the sociologist, my "good school" must satisfy two criteria simultaneously:

- Average academic achievement levels are high; and;

- That achievement is distributed equitably across students with a wide diversity of social backgrounds, across disadvantaged and advantaged students, across minority and majority students. This could be simplified as, "high achievement for all students."

Keeping this definition in mind, and re-examining the reading results comparing Catholic schools to the national average, it would appear that Catholic schools are "good schools," on average. In fact, as a large and rather homogeneous group of schools, they are attracting national attention in this regard. While there was considerable furor among educational researchers and policy makers over the original Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore report[4], particularly about their advocacy of tuition tax credits to facilitate public school students' access to Catholic schooling, another of their findings received much less attention -- the so-called "common school hypothesis." The above definition of "good schooling" falls very much in that vein, and NAEP reading assessment data confirm the Coleman et al. findings.

Having reviewed the results of the NAEP reading proficiency comparisons between Catholic schools and the nation's average schools, and having taken a short detour to consider a possible interpretation of those findings, let us turn to the NAEP writing assessment. We now have the background information we need to be able to compare the NAEP writing results with those for reading documented elsewhere and briefly summarized here. Since the NAEP assessments

are based on very large and randomly selected samples, we are able to make general conclusions about the relative performance of students in these types of schools.

Previous Catholic School Reading and Writing Results

Hoffer, Coleman, and Greeley assessed achievement growth of students between their sophomore and senior years of high school in Catholic and public schools, using data the first followup of the High School and Beyond[5]. They found that Catholic school students' achievement gains were highest in verbal achievement areas -- reading, vocabulary, and writing. Their results show reading and writing achievement gains to be quite equivalent, averaging about one year's advantage over students in public schools. They also found that minority and disadvantaged students evidenced particularly high gains in these curricular areas in Catholic schools. Thus, for secondary school students on the High School and Beyond tests, Catholic schools appeared to be equally "equalizing" in both reading and writing, and considerably more equalizing in both areas than public schools.

How Does NAEP Assess Writing Proficiency?

It is not easy to administer an objective test of writing skill. The 1980 and 1982 High School and Beyond writing tests were composed of 17 items and were constructed in a multiple choice format[6]. The NAEP writing tests required students to produce actual writing samples related to pictures, with tasks directed in three areas: informative, persuasive, and imaginative writing. The writing samples were scored in two ways: (a) based on the primary trait (i.e. how well the writers accomplished the particular task), and (b) on a general impression or "holistic" score, focusing "on the writers' overall fluency in

responding to each particular writing task...sensitive to a range of different skills, including organization, quality of content, grammar and usage, spelling, punctuation, and choice of words to express an idea"[7]. The writing samples were scored on a 4-point scale: (1) unsatisfactory; (2) minimal; (3) adequate; and (4) elaborated[8]. It is these holistic scores which are reported in this paper, and which are currently available from NAEP. Although NAEP has used certain primary trait scores for computing trends over the last decade, use of all writing items for a full analysis of the writing assessment is promised at a future date.

NAEP Writing Results

Background. Slightly less than 10 percent of the nation's students are in Catholic schools, according to the results of the NAEP survey. Moreover, the two groups of schools enroll somewhat different types of students, as shown on Table 1. Fewer Black students attend Catholic than national average schools -- about half the proportion of Black students at 4th and 11th grades, and about three-quarters as many Black students at 8th grade. However, there are slightly more Hispanic students in Catholic than in national average schools, particularly in the 4th grade. Combining the two minority groups, Catholic school enrollments are about 20 percent minority in 4th and 8th grades, and 15 percent in 11th grade. This compares to national average figures of about one-quarter minority students. There are striking differences in the proportion of over-age students at each grade level in the two types of schools, with only about 15 percent of Catholic school students falling in that category, compared to over 25 percent over-age students nationally. It is interesting to note that the

TABLE 1

Background Characteristics of Students in Catholic Schools

Compared to the National Average: 1983-84 NAEP Writing Assessment

	4th Grade		8th Grade		11th Grade	
	Cath. School	Nat'l Av.	Cath. School	Nat'l Av.	Cath. School	Nat'l Av.
% in Catholic Schools	.090		.093		.071	
Demographic Characteristics:						
% Female	.507	.507	.528	.501	.508	.500
% Black	.068	.140	.109	.138	.068	.144
% Hispanic	.139	.108	.095	.089	.080	.075
% Students Over Age (Over 9-, 13-, and 17 years old for 3 grades)	.169	.264	.184	.299	.137	.194
Parental Education:						
% Less Than High School	.031	.056	.035	.091	.060	.113
% More Than High School	.445	.393	.558	.471	.629	.523
Residential Location						
% From Northeast U.S.	.301	.225	.419	.227	.320	.248
% From Big Cities	.283	.074	.244	.106	.494	.088
% From Disadvantaged Urban Areas	.070	.116	.073	.085	.000	.100
% From Rural Areas	.063	.062	.028	.051	.020	.055

proportion of students over the grade-appropriate age declines for 11th graders in the national average, and we presume that this reflects the fact that many of these students have dropped out of high school, nationally. This phenomenon is considerably less marked for Catholic schools. It should be noted that the parents of Catholic school students have acquired somewhat more education than those of national average students.

Catholic schools are not distributed evenly across the country but are concentrated in certain localities, specifically in urban areas. However, they are not found in especially disadvantaged urban areas, and are quite unlikely to be found in rural areas (particularly middle and high schools). Catholic school students are somewhat more likely to come from the Northeast, an area which has higher average writing proficiency than other regions of the country.

Overall score comparisons. The most striking fact about the NAEP assessment is that the writing scores of students in both Catholic and national average schools are not very high. As seen in Table 2, average scores for students in both groups of schools, at all three grade levels, are little above the minimal range. Although students in Catholic schools write better than those in the nation's average schools, average scores are rather low for all students. Moreover, Figure 1 demonstrates that student scores increase more from 4th to 8th grade (when they are presumably receiving specific instruction in writing) than they do between 8th and 11th grades (when one would assume that substantial writing is required to complete almost every aspect of a student's school program). The "Catholic school writing proficiency advantage" (i.e. the degree to which Catholic school students' scores surpass the national average) is smaller than it was in reading (compare these results to those presented on pp. 4-5 of the Reading Report), and all scores increase less at the upper grades than they did in reading. Another similarity of these data to those in the Reading Report is that females outscore males at every grade level in both reading and writing. However, the "female writing advantage" is relatively higher than it was in reading, and appears to be about equally large in both Catholic and national average schools.

TABLE 2

1983-84 NAEP Writing Proficiency Scores for Students in Catholic Schools Compared to the National Average

	4th Grade		8th Grade		11th Grade	
	Cath. School	Nat'l Av.	Cath. School	Nat'l Av.	Cath. School	Nat'l Av.
Total	1.63	1.58	2.12	2.05	2.25	2.19
Males	1.55	1.50	2.04	1.56	2.15	2.09
Females	1.70	1.66	2.19	2.14	2.36	2.29

Comparisons by racial/ethnic group. Table 3 presents the writing proficiency scores broken out by grade level, by school grouping, and by racial/ethnic group. It is not surprising that White students outscore those who are both Black and Hispanic in both types of schools -- a phenomenon that is common to almost all achievement tests. Black 4th graders in Catholic schools are considerably below both their Hispanic and White counterparts, but by 8th and 11th grades, Black and Hispanic students in Catholic schools show virtually identical writing scores. Nevertheless, both groups score below White students in Catholic schools and above the average for minority students. However, recall that it was the relative advantage that White students demonstrated over those

Figure 1
1983-84 NAEP Writing Proficiency Scores
for Students in Catholic Schools Compared to the
National Average

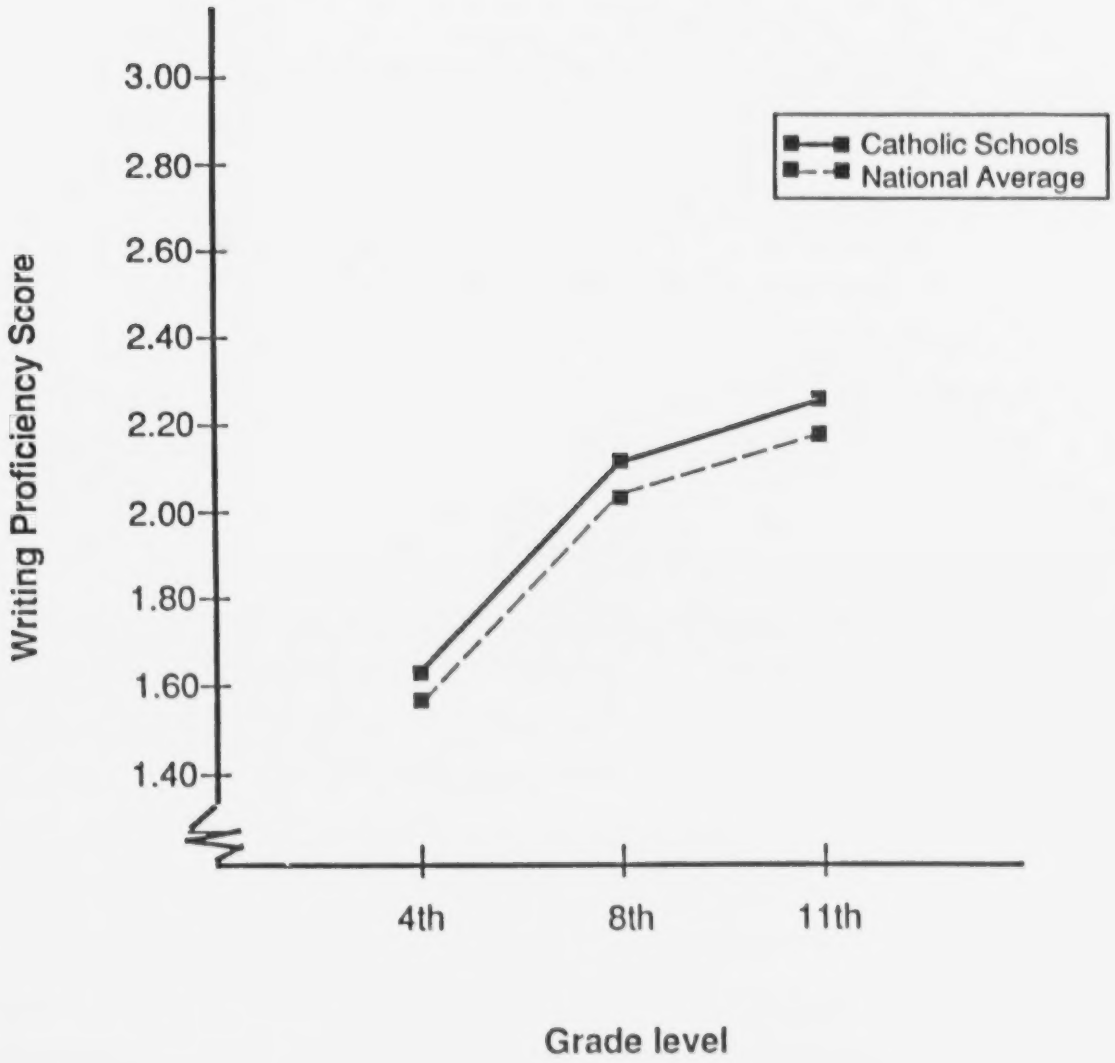


TABLE 3

1983-84 NAEP Writing Proficiency Scores for Racial/Ethnic Subgroups in Catholic Schools Compared to the National Average

	4th Grade		8th Grade		11th Grade	
	Cath. School	Nat'l Av.	Cath. School	Nat'l Av.	Cath. School	Nat'l Av.
White Students	1.67	1.63	2.16	2.11	2.29	2.24
Black Students	1.40	1.38	1.98	1.86	2.07	2.00
Hispanic Students	1.53	1.46	1.96	1.87	2.07	2.00

who were Black and Hispanic in the two types of schools which was an important finding in the NAEP reading scores -- i.e. although higher in absolute terms, the White advantage over minority students in Catholic high schools was considerably lower. From this finding, we concluded that Catholic schools appeared to be more socially equalizing in the area of reading.

These racial/ethnic differences in writing scores are presented graphically in Figures 2 and 3. That is, the heights of the bars in these graphs indicate the number of points by which White students' scores exceed those of Black (Figure 2) or Hispanic students (Figure 3) in the two types of schools. This

Figure 2
1983-84 NAEP Writing Proficiency: The Reading Advantage of White Students Compared to Black Students in Catholic and National Average Schools

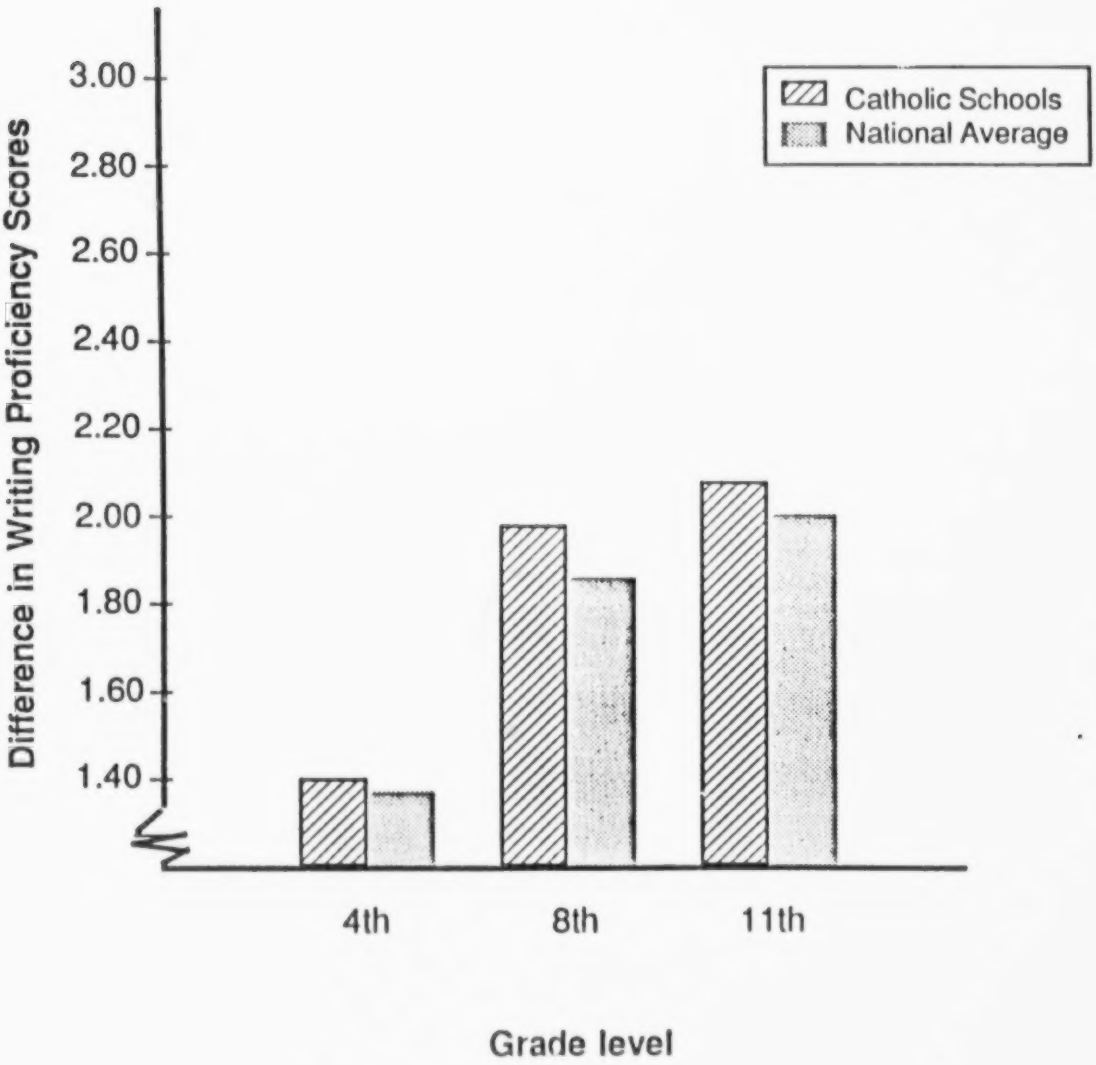
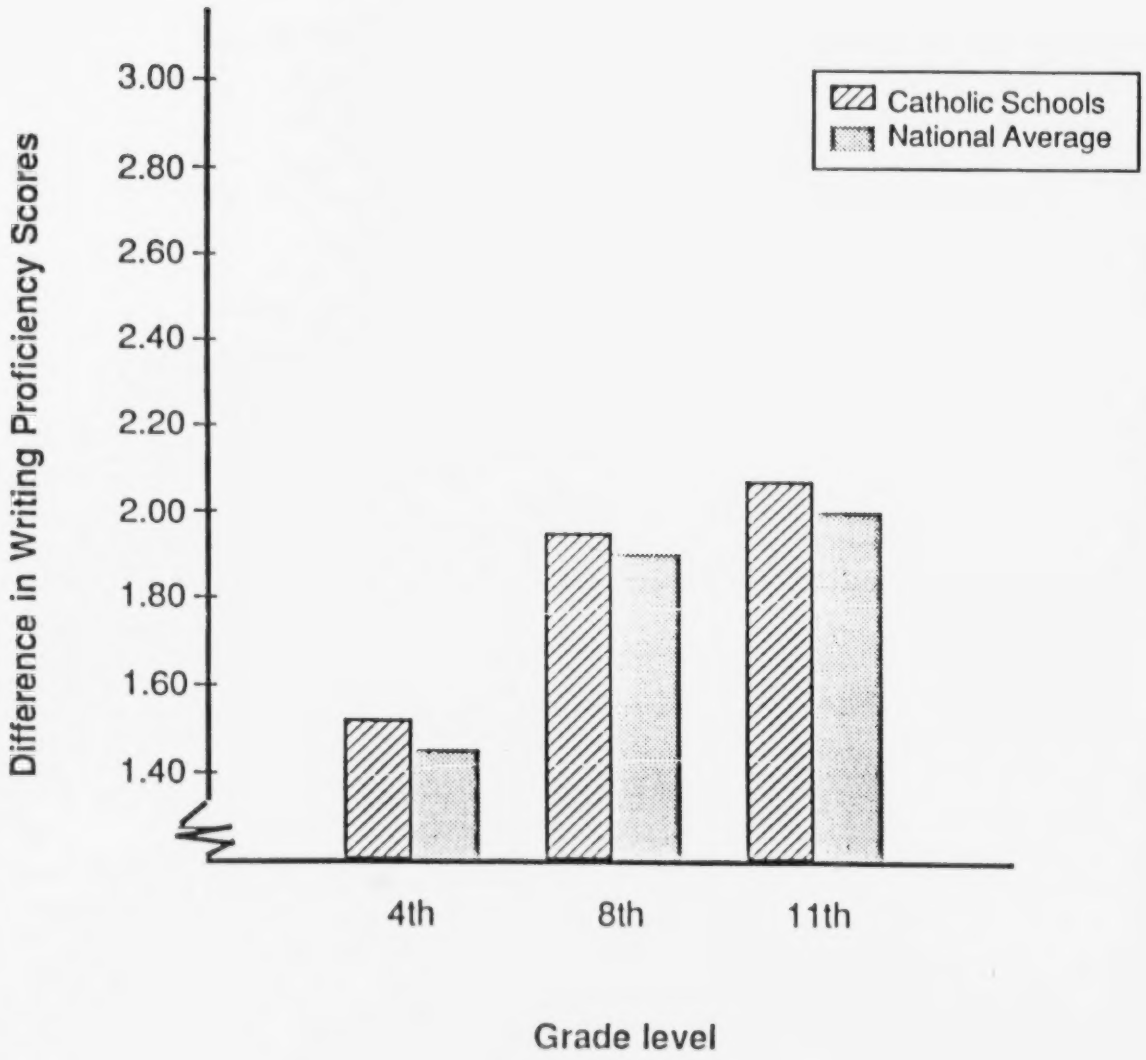


Figure 3
1983-84 NAEP Writing Proficiency: The Reading Advantage of White Students Compared to Hispanic Students in Catholic and National Average Schools



pattern is considerably different from that the one seen for the same relative comparisons in reading (see pp. 8 and 11 of the Reading Report). Although the bars representing the White student advantage over both Black and Hispanic students were lower in Catholic than national average schools for reading, the corresponding comparisons for writing show that the White advantage over both Black and Hispanic students is somewhat higher in Catholic than national average schools. Thus, we could not conclude that the equalizing effect of Catholic schooling, in racial/ethnic terms, which we saw in reading exists in writing. Since the samples for the assessments in the two curricular areas were virtually identical, it is not possible to discount these differences on sampling or selection grounds.

These relative writing score differences -- between males and females, between White and Black students, and between White and Hispanic students -- are shown in Table 4. Although differences of approximately .2 score points might appear to be rather small, when we compare those differences in statistical terms, they are large[9]. However, for none of these comparisons is there a pattern of their being consistently smaller in Catholic than national average schools, the pattern which we have earlier characterized as equalizing.

We repeat that the most striking feature of the writing scores, on average, is how low they are. That is, no subgroups in either Catholic or national average schools at any grade level achieved an "elaborated" level. Writing at this level required a "cohesive organizing framework," which would seem appropriate for students by the time they graduated from high school. Moreover, the proportions of students attaining even an "adequate" level in either type of school was trivial, although the requirement of "present[ing] details within an organizing framework" appears appropriate for students even as they enter secondary school. For example, by 11th grade, 72 percent of Catholic school

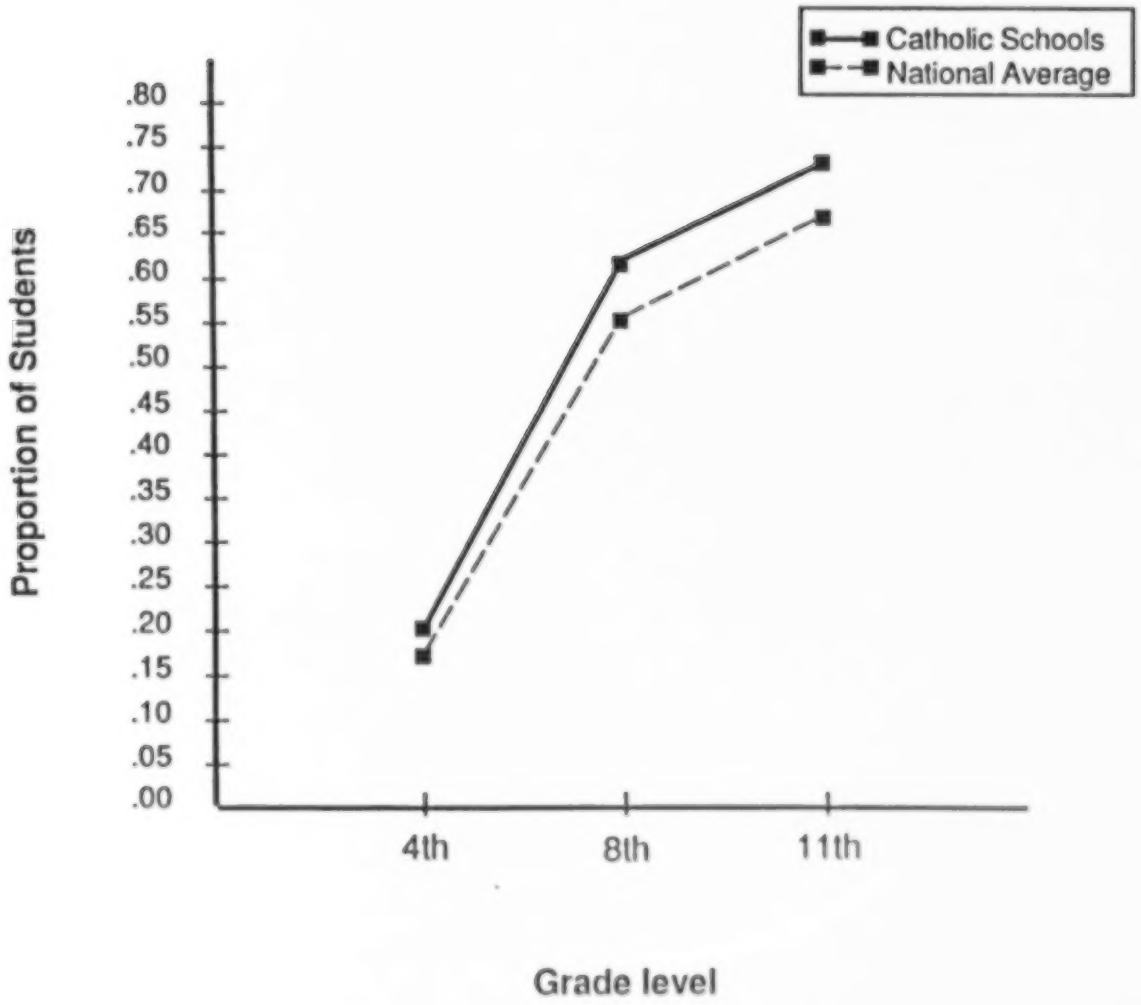
TABLE 4

1983-84 NAEP Writing Proficiency Score Differences Between Sexes and Racial/Ethnic Subgroups in Catholic Schools Compared to the National Average

	4th Grade		8th Grade		11th Grade	
	Cath. School	Nat'l Av.	Cath. School	Nat'l Av.	Cath. School	Nat'l Av.
Female Advantage Over Male Students	.15	.16	.15	.18	.21	.20
White Advantage Over Black Students	.27	.25	.18	.25	.22	.24
White Advantage Over Hispanic Students	.14	.17	.20	.25	.22	.24

students, compared to 55 percent of the national average, reached even a level of "minimal" writing skills. Note also that the increase in the proportions attaining 'minimal' proficiency levels off between 8th and 11th grade, the same pattern seen for score averages. Moreover, only about 3 percent of either group were rated "adequate." In essence, according to NAEP writing raters, American students are rather poor writers.

Figure 4
1983-84 NAEP Writing Proficiency Scores
for Students in Catholic Schools Compared to the National Average
Proportion at or Above 'Minimal' Writing Skill



Summary of results. Catholic school students write better than the national average at all three grade levels, and these Catholic school writing advantages show strong statistical significance. However, these accomplishments should not be a strong source of pride for the Catholic educational establishment. The writing skills of students increase sharply between 4th and 8th grade, when the school curriculum supposedly contains explicit instruction in writing. However, during high school, when students presumably are receiving less instruction in writing but are expected to use their writing skills frequently, there is less growth in proficiency. This leveling-off trend is more marked with writing than reading. It would appear that students are unlikely to gain in writing skills without experiencing specific instruction in those skills.

Although it appears that Catholic school students, on average, are better writers than the national average, the same special advantage for minority students which we saw for Catholic schools in reading is not evident in writing. That means that there is no particular Catholic school "equity advantage " for these minority groups in writing, compared to the corresponding comparisons among the national average of schools. Therefore, we cannot conclude that Catholic schools are particularly advantageous for the writing proficiency of minority students, above and beyond the overall sector advantage in this area of the curriculum.

In sum, the major findings from these comparisons of Catholic school students to students in the nation's average schools in the curricular area of writing assessment are as follows:

- o According to the judges of the writing assessment conducted by NAEP in 1983-84, students in American schools do not write very well, on average;

- Catholic school students, however, write better than the national average at all three grade levels;

- Students gain more in writing skills in late elementary and middle school than they seem to during secondary school;

- On average, girls are considerably better writers than boys. This extends across both types of schools, and all three grade levels;

- Minority students -- both Black and Hispanic -- score considerably below White students in writing. This minority disadvantage is considerably stronger in writing than in reading, and is equally evident in Catholic schools as the national average.

From these comparisons of Catholic school students to the national average using data collected by the National Assessment of Educational Progress in the areas of verbal proficiency, we now know that students in Catholic schools -- at the elementary, middle, and high school levels -- both read and write significantly better than the national average of students in American schools. We also know that in reading, the higher proficiency level evidenced by Catholic school students is accompanied by another strong trend showing that achievement differences between White and minority students are considerably lower than the national average for these comparisons.

Selectivity bias. These positive skill factors relating to Catholic school attendance could as well be attributable to the more advantaged students and families who choose this educational option as to the schools themselves. That

is, the higher performance of Catholic school students could be explainable as an artifact of "selectivity bias." The comparison of the background of students attending the two groups of schools shown in Table 1 attests to somewhat more advantaged students attending Catholic schools at all three grade levels. It is a common perception that Catholic schools (as private schools) enroll more affluent students who were hand-picked for attendance. Although important to recognize, the selection differences are not strong.

We can explore this selectivity at the high school level. From data gathered on every Catholic high school in America[10], we know that 88 percent of all students who apply to Catholic high schools are admitted, and that very few are suspended or expelled. For example, the average Catholic high school expels less than one student per year. The major selection criterion is exercised by the families and students who come to Catholic schools, and not by the schools directly. If families don't want the sort of education delivered by these schools, and students don't want to conform to the order and discipline which characterize the schools, they are unlikely to present themselves at the door of a Catholic school. This leads to a relatively homogeneous student body, with shared values and shared expectations by and large, than in the nation's schools as a whole. However, also know that there are considerable differences in the schools these students come into, in how the schools are organized, in their operational policies, and in certain behaviors evidenced by students which relate to academics. Moreover, the school outcomes of the two student groups are considerably different (Catholic school students are about one-half standard deviation higher in overall achievement, and about twice as likely to plan to graduate from college).

Therefore, it is very likely that at least part of the achievement advantage in reading and writing shown in the NAEP assessments for Catholic school

students compared to America's average students is due to the slightly more advantaged nature of the student bodies of those schools, on average. However, it is also unlikely that such 'selection' entirely accounts for the differences in achievement. Other research which has investigated this question for high school students has shown that about half of the achievement advantage for Catholic school students is explainable by background differences. Although we cannot extend such statistical controls to the NAEP data for reasons described previously, it is likely that the results would be about the same.

That still leaves a fairly large (and probably statistically significant) advantage of Catholic school students over the national average in the curricular areas of reading and writing. This portion of the "Catholic school advantage" is probably attributable to factors directly or indirectly related to the schools themselves -- policies on homework, curriculum, graduation requirements, guidance toward post-secondary education, and the like[11]. The equalizing effects of Catholic schooling which were suggested by the smaller majority/minority achievement differences in reading were not seen in writing, however.

Although not specific to Catholic schools, but characteristic of the national average of schools and students at all three grade levels, again we mention that American students don't seem to write very well. Moreover, in analyses of trends in writing between 1974 and 1984 reported by NAEP, it was concluded that... "despite an increased emphasis on writing at all grade levels during the decade, students in 1984 appeared to be only just regaining thier 1974 levels of proficiency"[12]. Although the report has found that schools have increased the attention to writing instruction over the decade, the actual amount of writing students do has remained about the same. Due to the sampling design employed by NAEP, comparisons between Catholic school students and the national average on the teaching of writing were not possible.

Notes

1. See Turnbull, W.W. (1985). Student Change, Program Change: Why SAT Scores Kept Falling. College Board Report No. 85-2. New York: College Entrance Examination Board. He divides the score decline into two segments: (a) demographic change in students; and (b) less demanding school curriculum and grading policies.

2. See Rock, D.A., Ekstrom, R.B., Goertz, M.E., Hilton, T.L., and Pollack, J. (1984). Excellence in High School Education: Cross-Sectional Study, 1972-1980. Final Report. A report to the National Center for Educational Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Contract No. 300-83-0247. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, December 1984. These researchers have documented the demographic and achievement differences between students who were high school seniors in 1972 and 1980.

3. See Boyer, E. L. (1986). "Communicating values: The social and moral imperataives of education." Momentum, 17(3), September 1986, pp. 6-9.

4. Coleman, J.S., Hoffer, T., and Kilgore, S.B. (1982). High School Achievement: Public, Catholic, and Other Private Schools Compared. New York: Basic Books.

5. Hoffer, T., Greeley, A.M., and Coleman, J.S. (1985). "Achievement Growth in Public and Catnolic Schools." Sociology of Education, 58(2), pp. 74-97.

6. The HS&B tests asked students to evaluate the grammar and syntax of written work, rather than requiring students to write themselves. Therefore, the HS&B and NAEP tests are probably not tapping exactly the same skill.

7. Applebee, A.N., Langer, J.A., and Mullis, I.V.S. (1986). Writing: Trends Across the Decade, 1974-84. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, Report No: 15-W-01, p. 6.

8. These four levels are described by NAEP as follows:

   Unsatisfactory. Writers who were unable to respond satisfactorily to this task provided only the barest information, misinformation, or disjointed details so that information did not fit.

   Minimal. Writers provided some details, but in unrelated ways. They created no organizational framework for the reader to use to visualize how the various parts of the picture might fit together.

   Adequate. Writers needed to describe and interrelate most of the details in the picture and to present details within an organizing framework.

   Elaborated. Writers presented elaborated papers when they wrote an extended description within a cohesive organizing framework -- spatial, formal, thematic, metaphoric, or narrative -- to provide a context for the reader. (Applebee, et al.,1986, pp. 10-13).

9. Statistical significance is achieved when the difference between two means is more than twice as large as their combined standard errors (a standard

t-test at the .05 probability level or below). Using this criterion, these differences are all statistically significant.

10. National Catholic Education Association (1985). The Catholic High School: A National Portrait. Washington, DC: National Catholic Education Association.

11. This is documented in a number of places, including Bryk, A.S., Holland, P.B., Lee, V.E., and Carriedo, R.A. (1984). Effective Catholic High Schools: An Exploration. Washington, DC: National Catholic Education Association; Hoffer, et al. (1985); Lee, V.E. (1985). Investigating the Relationship Between Social Class and Academic Achievement in Public and Catholic Schools. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

12. Applebee, et. al. (1986), p. 7.